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APOLOGY OF SOCRATIC STUDIES

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Abstract: In this paper, we defend Socratic studies as a research programme against several recent attacks, including at least one recently published in *Polis* (by William Prior). Critics have argued that the study of Socrates, based upon evidence mostly or entirely derived from some set of Plato's dialogues, is founded upon faulty and indefensible historical or hermeneutical technique. We begin by identifying what we believe are the foundational principles of Socratic studies, as the field has been pursued in recent years, and we then show how the research programme that derives from accepting these principles is not defeated by any of the most common recent criticisms of it. Specifically, we argue that challenges to sorting Plato's dialogues by date, more general challenges to historicist interpretations of Plato's dialogues, as well as recent literary criticisms of Socratic studies all fail to undermine the research programme. We conclude with some thoughts about how and why Socratic studies has proved itself a valuable and fruitful research programme.

I
The Accusations Against Socratic Studies

> I don't know what effect my accusers have had on you, Athenians, but they were speaking so persuasively that I myself almost forgot who I am. And yet they said virtually nothing that's true (Plato, *Apology* 17a1–4).

At the 2001 Sixth Annual Arizona Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy, in a prefatory remark before commencing with the reading of his paper, Charles Kahn announced that he thinks that scholars everywhere should simply give up talking about 'the philosophy of Socrates'. These are the accusations as we understand them: 'Socratic studies invents a bogus philosopher by the name of Socrates and it does so by means that are completely at odds with proper historical or hermeneutical technique. In doing so, Socratic studies corrupts the minds of students and scholars.' On the basis of such accusations, Kahn and other critics of Socratic studies would condemn to death the research programme to which the authors of this paper have devoted almost all of their collaborative research for over two decades now.

We propose in this paper to defend Socratic studies against several recent criticisms that have been made of it, including some by Kahn himself. In particular, we shall defend the widespread practice within Socratic studies of focusing exclusively, or at least predominantly, on the Socrates — and the philosophy portrayed as belonging to the character by that name — in a certain group of Plato's dialogues.

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Those engaged in the field plainly do not agree on all of the issues surrounding the status of the Socrates of Plato's 'Socratic dialogues' in general or on each specific detail. Such differences may be very important ones with respect to the degree to which the familiar criticisms actually apply to scholars working in this field. Accordingly, we begin, first, by specifying what we regard as the two main principles that we believe are shared by Socratic scholars, and that constitute the foundations of Socratic studies. We go on to note the kinds of disagreements that are accepted among those who share in this research programme. Then, in the sections immediately following the first one, we consider a few of the recently influential objections to these principles, and explain why we think these objections do not undermine the principles, properly understood. Our conclusion will be that none of the reasons we have considered count against the principles and thus, against Socratic studies as a research programme. We will then close with a brief discussion about Socratic studies as a research programme, explaining why we think it merits this characterization and what follows from regarding it as such. As Aristotle characterized the field of ethics, we cannot expect exactitude or certainty on this issue, nor do we in any way pretend to be supplying such confidence with our arguments. We claim only to achieve the negative conclusion that the criticisms of the foundational principles of Socratic scholarship fail to supply adequate reasons for abandoning it.

II
The Two Principles of Socratic Studies

> One of you, perhaps, might respond: 'So what's the matter with you, Socrates? Where did these accusations come from? For surely if you weren't engaged in something unusual but were only doing something different from most people, these rumours and talk about you wouldn't have gotten started. So tell us what it is, so that we don't reach a hasty judgement about you' (Plato, *Apology* 20c4–d1).

II.1 The Identity Principle

The first of the two principles we propose to defend against criticisms in this paper is what we will call The Identity Principle:

> The Identity Principle: Socrates is the same character, with essentially the same philosophical views, in each of a certain group of dialogues by Plato. (This character cannot be assumed to be identical to the character by that name in works by other ancient sources, or in any dialogues by Plato other than those in this certain group.)[3]

[3] We provide and discuss the relevant list of these dialogues in more detail when we discuss what we call the 'Relevant Dialogues Assumption', below. We are indebted to Anthony Chu for calling our attention to the fact that we must add the words in the parentheses to complete the principle.

Critics often argue as though all scholars who accept the Identity Principle accept one very extreme version of it, one that might be called the Journalistic Historical Identity Thesis. By this, we mean the thesis that, in the relevant group of dialogues, Plato has attempted to present a precisely accurate portrait of the historical Socrates. In fact, however, no one ever claims that Plato is giving a perfectly accurate portrait of Socrates, so any argument aimed at invalidating the principle(s) behind this practice is an argument against no one.

Another, plainly weaker, version of the Identity Principle is what might be called the General Historical Identity Thesis. According to this thesis, the ways in which Socrates is depicted — even if not absolutely accurate in every detail — nonetheless form a generally reliable picture of who the historical Socrates was, how he spoke and argued, and what his philosophy was. This thesis, which even by its most enthusiastic supporters is never held as a matter of historical demonstration (whatever that might be!), functions for many Socratic scholars as an interpretive hypothesis whose plausibility is defended on various grounds but whose truth is never claimed (to our knowledge, at least) as simply established or proved by any of the arguments given in its favour.

We will have more to say about the epistemological or evidential value of such hypotheses in the final section of this paper, but for now let us simply notice that this view is completely invulnerable to the objection that there are historical anachronisms within the relevant dialogues, for example, since it does not claim that all of the details of the Platonic characterizations are historically accurate, nor does it deny that Plato might have invented meetings with certain interlocutors, or even whole conversations with interlocutors the historical Socrates may or may not have ever spoken with at any length. A conclusive refutation of this thesis — if its critics were to attempt one — would have to consist in some reason that was sufficient for concluding that Plato depicts Socrates in some way that others who knew the historical Socrates would recognize was false. Plainly, however, such a conclusive refutation of this thesis would require precisely what most critics claim we *cannot* have: an accurate knowledge of the historical Socrates. (We will have more to say about this in section III.2, below.)

Now, we know of several reasons why we might be agnostic about the General Historical Identity Thesis. Indeed, we believe this sort of agnosticism is all that even the most powerful arguments that have been mounted against it have ever managed to support. But, for reasons we will explain in our replies to the criticisms of this thesis, we do not find anything in them that warrants putting an end to Socratic studies.

Although it seems plain that the General Historical Identity Thesis is what grounded the research programme of Socratic studies in its earliest stages, we believe that the majority of Socratic scholars working within this programme now obviously recognize the programme itself as sufficiently robust as not to

feel the need to make any decision at all about this thesis, preferring instead only to affirm a version of The Identity Principle that is actually far weaker than the General Historical Identity Thesis. One can maintain the validity of the research programme and accept only what we will call the Philosophical Identity Thesis, which claims only that 'the philosophy of Socrates' or 'Socratic philosophy' is identical to the philosophy given to the character named 'Socrates' in the relevant group of Platonic dialogues. Indeed, we believe many working within the research programme that is 'Socratic studies' now adhere only to this weaker principle. The Philosophical Identity Thesis makes no commitments of any kind about the historical accuracy of the Platonic portrait of Socrates or Socratic philosophy. This thesis, instead, simply insists that there is a philosophy worth studying and trying to articulate that is contained and expressed in the relevant Platonic dialogues and that is distinguishable from the philosophy we find in other Platonic dialogues — the ones, that is, not included in the 'Socratic' group.

Scholars who accept the Philosophical Identity Thesis may actually find questions of historical accuracy both tedious and irresolvable — in other words, a waste of time. Now, few scholars we know would ever put it quite so starkly as this. Most of us would at least be interested in knowing whether and to what degree and on what issues Plato is historically reliable in what he says about Socrates in any of his dialogues. But even the clearest and most undeniable proof of Plato's historical inaccuracy would have little effect on most Socratic scholarship. Perhaps notes would be added to scholarly works, acknowledging the historical non-identity of Plato's Socrates with the historical Socrates. But then the rest of the book or article would proceed almost exactly as it would have without such proof, since the historical identity and characteristics of the flesh-and-blood Socrates never really made any difference to the enterprise in which such books and articles were intended to play a part, which is, after all, only to explicate the philosophical contents of the relevant dialogues of Plato.[4] Plainly, any criticisms aimed at undermining or invalidating Plato's authority as a historical source on Socrates are entirely

[4] To give just three examples from very recent books in the field, we get this from Hugh H. Benson: 'Whose epistemological views, then, am I examining? The short answer to this question is that I will be attempting to uncover the epistemological views of the Socratic character in Plato's early dialogues. No part of my subsequent argument depends on assuming that these views represent the views of either the historical Socrates or the author of the dialogues himself' (*Socratic Wisdom* (New York, 2000), p. 7). George Rudebusch says, 'This book's concern is the philosophical ideas in these dialogues, rather than the historical issues of to whom to attribute the ideas or at which developmental stage Plato wrote which dialogue' (*Socrates, Pleasure and Value* (New York, 1999), p. 129, note 1). Roslyn Weiss simply proclaims, 'The Socrates referred to is the Socrates of Plato's dialogues. The relationship between this Socrates and the historical Socrates is not a concern of this book' (*Socrates Dissatisfied: An Analysis of Plato's Crito* (New York, 1998), p. 3, note 1).

irrelevant to the scholarly practices founded upon this version of the Identity Principle. We realize, of course, that this version of the identity principle gives us no reason to attribute the philosophy in question to *Socrates*, other than the use of that name in Plato and the conventions of the research programme itself — conventions that derive from the research programme's traditional inclusion of (and historical roots in) scholarship that accepts the stronger General Historical Identity Thesis. But Plato's use of the name and the conventions of a research programme may well be sufficiently good reasons for continuing the practice of calling this philosophy 'Socratic', especially since that practice has now taken root within the larger research programme we call the history of philosophy. Until and unless, then, some anti-historicist provides a compelling reason to *stop* this practice — which merely sceptical arguments about the assumptions underlying otherwise apparently successful and valuable practices virtually never accomplish — the identification of this philosophy as 'Socratic' will continue, if only for the lack of any plainly more adequate identity to give to it. And as we shall argue in our final section, the very robustness of a research programme confers some evidentiary value upon its principles and practices.

II.2 The Relevant Dialogues Assumption

The second principle we wish to defend in this paper is what we will call The Relevant Dialogues Assumption.

> The Relevant Dialogues Assumption: The group of Plato's dialogues relevant to questions about Socrates (or the philosophy of Socrates) is the group generally identified as the 'early dialogues' or as the 'Socratic dialogues'.

Dialogues that are frequently included in the list of the group relevant to the study of Socrates and the philosophy of Socrates are, in alphabetical order: *Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Ion, Laches, Lysis, Protagoras, Republic I.*

Some Socratic scholars freely cite the *First Alcibiades*, or the *Theages*,[5] or the *Meno*,[6] or the *Menexenus*. Others steadfastly refuse to include one or another of these dialogues, for various reasons. Still others will exclude some of the dialogues we included on the first list.[7] There is certainly no unanimity among Socratic scholars as to exactly which dialogues should be included on

[5] We have in mind, for these two dialogues, Mark McPherran, who often cites them in his work.

[6] Most scholarship on what is called the 'unity of the virtues', or on 'Socrates' denial of *akrasia*', or on 'Socratic moral psychology', cites this dialogue.

[7] Vlastos expresses the view, for example, that the *Euthydemus* and *Lysis* are what he calls 'transitional' dialogues, which attribute to Socrates actions, views, or approaches that Vlastos thinks should be identified as Platonic rather than Socratic. See *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge and New York, 1991), pp. 46–7.

the list, although there is widespread agreement about the majority of works that belong on the list.[8] In any event, precise agreements on this issue are obviously not required within Socratic studies. All that is required is general agreement about a fairly large sub-set of the ones listed above.

III
Criticisms of the General Historical Identity Thesis

III.1 Contra Chronology

> And when anyone asks them what I do and what I teach, they have nothing to say and draw a blank, but so they don't appear to be confused, they say what's commonly said against all philosophers (Plato, *Apology* 23d2–6).

Several arguments have been recently made against the ways in which the relevant dialogues, to which the second principle refers, have been selected. Most of the criticisms recently made have disputed sorting Plato's dialogues chronologically. Two strategies for sorting the dialogues chronologically have enjoyed wide acceptance: stylometry and content analysis. Socratic scholars have typically proclaimed both methods to yield very similar results, and — because the two methodologies are (or are at least claimed to be) independent of one another — the perceived similarities of their results have been counted as mutually supporting. For the sake of brevity, however, we wish to focus on content analysis and propose to show why this method provides ample support (independent of stylometry) for identifying a group of dialogues of the sort required by the established practice's two foundational principles.

Interestingly, even some of the most vehement critics of chronology end up employing content analyses in such a way as to identify a group of dialogues that would serve well both principles underlying the established practice of Socratic studies. In his introduction to the recent Hackett collection, *Plato, Complete Works*, John Cooper writes,

> I urge readers not to undertake the study of Plato's works holding in mind the customary chronological groupings of 'early', 'middle', and 'late' dialogues. It is safe to recognize only the group of six late dialogues. Even for these, it is better to relegate thoughts about chronology to the secondary position they deserve and to focus on the literary and philosophical content of the works, taken on their own and in relation to the others.[9]

Since Cooper plainly says that only the 'six late dialogues' can safely be recognized as a chronological group, one might suppose that Cooper's argument

[8] See D. Nails, 'Problems with Vlastos' Platonic Developmentalism', *Ancient Philosophy*, 13 (1993), pp. 273–92.

[9] J. Cooper, 'Introduction', in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997), pp. viii–xxvi, xiv.

would have the effect of nullifying the second foundational principle of Socratic studies. Indeed, even his associate editor seems to have understood Cooper this way: D.S. Hutchinson cites Cooper's introduction without further argument or explanation for Hutchinson's claim that there is no reason for thinking that Plato's 'early' or 'Socratic' dialogues provide 'reliable reports of how Socrates philosophized', and no reason for thinking that 'it was Plato's intention in these dialogues to represent the philosophy of Socrates'.[10] But this is not at all what Cooper himself concludes, for on the very next page of his introduction we find him saying this:

> One very large group of dialogues can usefully be identified here. These are what we may call the Socratic dialogues — provided that the term is understood to make no chronological claims, but rather simply to indicate certain broad thematic affinities. In these works, not only is Socrates the principal speaker, but also the topics and manner of the conversation conform to what we have reason to think, both from Plato's own representations in the *Apology* and from other contemporary literary evidence, principally that of the writer Xenophon, was characteristic of the historical Socrates' own philosophical conversations.[11]

After providing a list of these dialogues (which includes all of those given in our own list, above, plus several of the *spuria* and *dubia*), Cooper draws his conclusion:

> [I]n these dialogues Plato intends not to depart, as he does elsewhere, from Socratic methods of reasoning or from the topics to which Socrates devoted his attention, and no doubt he carries over into these portraits much of the substance of Socrates' own philosophizing, as Plato understood it.[12]

Despite his dismissive attitude towards chronology, then, Cooper ends up endorsing a view that looks very much like the General Historical Identity Thesis, for Cooper thinks that the 'Socrates' of the relevant dialogues is based on the Athenian philosopher who was executed by the city in 399 BC. Cooper appears not to limit himself to the weaker claim that this is the Socrates worth studying philosophically. If Cooper's position is consistent — and we think it is — then it follows that one can jettison the entire apparatus and the methodologies of chronological ordering and nonetheless advocate some version of both the first and the second foundational principles of Socratic studies.

A similar result is reached by Debra Nails, another distinguished critic of chronology. Having argued that the entire project of chronological groupings of dialogues is indefensible, Nails proposes another approach — one in which we find Socrates arguing in the *agora*, and another in which the style is more

[10] D. Hutchinson, 'Review of Mark L. McPherran's *The Religion of Socrates*', *Ancient Philosophy*, 19 (1999), pp. 601–6, 603.

[11] Cooper, 'Introduction', p. xv.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

suited to Plato's Academy. But the dialogues Nails puts into the 'agora' group match up quite nicely with the ones Socratic scholars have all along put into the 'Socratic' group.

It should be noted that even Kahn, who also rejects virtually any attempt to order the dialogues chronologically beyond the last six mentioned by Cooper in the passage cited above,[13] is fully committed to dividing the corpus into three groups, just as do those engaged in Socratic studies. Indeed, Kahn thinks that it is appropriate to subdivide the first group. The result is that, with the exception of one sub-grouping consisting of three dialogues,[14] Kahn's first group is virtually identical to the list we say is most often used as the basis of Socratic studies programme. Of course, Kahn does not agree at all with the participants in Socratic studies about what philosophical project is reflected in this list. Kahn takes these dialogues to be suitable philosophical introductions to the metaphysical and epistemological doctrines explored and defended in the *Republic*. Participants in the Socratic studies programme see these dialogues as containing a number of salient doctrines that are different from and in several instances incompatible with those developed in the *Republic*. What is important for our purposes, however, is that Kahn is in substantial agreement with Socratic scholars that the dialogues that form the basis of Socratic studies are best understood as forming a single grouping. Like Cooper and Nails, whose lists also differ to some extent with those we find employed by most who are engaged in Socratic studies, Kahn's project shows that content analysis — even if it has been extolled as an instrument of chronology — requires no commitment to chronology in order to sustain the field of Socratic studies.

III.2 Anti-historicist Criticisms

> I'm afraid that neither of us knows anything admirable and good, but this person thinks he knows something when he doesn't, whereas I, just as I don't know, don't even think I know (Plato, *Apology* 21d4–6).

Another common criticism of Socratic scholarship insists that serious study of works by Plato's contemporaries, many of which are quite similar in style and subject, disqualifies any claim Socratic scholars have made for Plato's historical reliability in any dialogue or group of dialogues. We can see from the outset just how limited this criticism actually is, for it obviously leaves wholly

[13] The exceptions are the *Apology* and *Crito,* which C. Kahn thinks 'are Socratic in an historical sense', and the *Ion* and the *Hippias Major*. These four, Kahn holds, were the first works written after the death of Socrates. See *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of Literary Form* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 52–3. Another exception is the chronological ordering of the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*. Kahn thinks the *Meno* must have been written before the *Phaedo* (*Ibid.*, p. 47).

[14] These are the *Symposium, Phaedo,* and *Cratylus* (see Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, p. 47).

intact the point of view held by those who remain agnostic about historical questions and endorse only the Philosophical Identity Thesis — and that thesis is enough to support the pursuits of the Socratic research programme. But it is also worthwhile to give closer inspection to the typical forms this objection takes, to see how ineffective it is even against the historicism that is its proper target.

Perhaps there are stronger or more sophisticated versions of this criticism, but let us consider two statements of it that we find representative, one given in E. de Stryker and Simon R. Slings' recent commentary on Plato's *Apology,*[15] and one by D. S. Hutchinson, in his hotly antagonistic review of Mark McPherran's recent book on Socratic religion.[16] De Stryker and Slings raise the question of whether or not we should regard Plato's *Apology* as historically accurate. Although they concede that there can be no definitive proof either way,[17] they favour a negative answer, and offer this argument for their inclination: 'The most conclusive proof that Plato, when writing his *Apology*, did not feel bound to stick as closely as possible to the main lines of what Socrates had actually said in court is, in my eyes, its exceptional literary quality.'[18]

If there is an argument here, it is clearly a *non sequitur*. Why should we conclude that just because a work has identifiable literary features or significant literary merit that it cannot be historically accurate? What odd view of history (or of literature) must we adopt to think the two are somehow incompatible? Perhaps de Stryker and Slings suppose that the only really good literature is or must be fiction — but why should we share such an absurd prejudice? Why, indeed, couldn't a writer as talented as Plato write works as dramatically engaging and as artistically complex and intricate as his dialogues plainly are, while maintaining quite strict adherence to what he knew as the historical truth?[19]

[15] E. de Stryker and S. Slings, *Plato's Apology of Socrates: A Literary and Philosophical Study with Running Commentary* (Leiden and New York, 1994).

[16] D. Hutchinson, 'Review of McPherran', pp. 601–6.

[17] 'I would dare to assert that there is, on the one hand, no single sentence in the Platonic *Apology* that [the historical] Socrates could not have actually pronounced, and on the other, that the published work contains no passage so specifically un–Platonic that it cannot be Plato's work.' The quote can be found in de Stryker and Slings, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*, pp. 7–8.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[19] In making this criticism, scholarly history is repeating itself. Here is what Paul Friedländer has to say about Olaf Gigon's expression of the same sort of anti-historicism in 1947: 'A basic mistake of Gigon's remarkable book . . . is its contrast of the dialogues of the Socratics as "literary creation" (*Dichtung*) with the so-called historical reports. In dealing with historic truth, however, Gigon's frame of reference in the authenticity of the dossier or police report–in that case, what is left of Thucydides?–while his idea of literary creation appears to coincide with what we call "fiction".' Friedländer goes on to fault Gigon for giving up on Socrates: 'How can Gigon, though he knows that Socrates is an

Hutchinson's version of the anti-historicist criticism at least has the general form of an induction: '[T]o regard Plato's *Apology* as any kind of accurate report of what Socrates said is anachronistic and naïve, for it ignores the literary genre in which Plato's *epideixis* participated.'[20] Hutchinson's critique is based, plainly, on the presumption that Hutchinson *knows* a number of important facts about Plato's goals. Hutchinson *knows*, for example, that Plato's work belongs ('participated') in an established genre in ancient literature. Hutchinson *knows* this, because he *knows* that Plato did not intend to write works of any distinct or new sort, but instead only of a sort that would be seen and understood as belonging to a certain genre — apparently, that of *epideixeis*.[21] And not just this, but Hutchinson *knows* that the works within this genre cannot or should not ever be counted as representing 'any kind of accurate report'. In light of this window on the world of ancient Greek literature, Hutchinson is confident that the genre in which Plato was participating ruled out more or less accurate accounts of the views of the historical Socrates. Given that this insight governs Hutchinson's reading of the dialogues, it is fair to ask just how Hutchinson *knows* all of these things.

Of course, he doesn't know them, and so his anti-historicist views must be appraised according to the same ancient evidence we use in appraising the historicist views of scholars like McPherran. And what do we learn if we consider such evidence? What we find is that even the most dedicated anti-historicists — such as de Stryker and Slings — upon whom Hutchinson heaps praise for 'admirable scholarly technique' are unable to show that Plato's works (in this case, the *Apology*) are conventional according to many of the tropes they regard as central to the relevant genre. Instead, they find many of the ordinary conventions missing altogether, and many others 'transposed'.[22] So it looks as though the attempt to understand Plato through the lens through which genre scholars have tried to inspect Plato (so far, at any rate) is unlikely to be persuasive.

Even if we did have compelling evidence for thinking that Plato intended to write within a certain genre, this is no reason to think that what he wrote is fictional — unless, of course, we knew that the rules of the genre *required* fiction. Although we can be sure that some *epideixeis* were fiction, we know of no reason to think that historical inaccuracy was a *requirement* of the genre.

"elemental force", put aside "in determined resignation" the inquiry in the historic existence of that "elemental force" (14f.)?' See Friedländer, *Plato*, translated from the German by Hans Meyerhoff (New York, 1958), vol. I, pp. 361–2, note 6.

[20] Hutchinson, 'Review of McPherran', p. 603.

[21] We find it interesting and telling that the several critics of the historicist view tend to put the *Apology* into different genres. For example, see the view developed in Hutchinson, 'Review of McPherran', pp. 601–6 and contrast it with that of Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, pp. 1–35 and with that found in D. Morrison, 'On the Alleged Historical Reliability of Plato's *Apology*', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 82 (2000), pp. 235–65, 240.

[22] de Stryker and Slings, *Plato's Apology of Socrates*, p. 34.

INDEX TO VOLUMES 1–20

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The Society for the Study of Greek Political Thought was formed in 1977, with Dale Hall (University College of Swansea) as the Editor of *Polis*, its newsletter, Peter Nicholson (also at Swansea) as the Treasurer, and Fred Rosen (London School of Economics) as Conference Secretary. When Dale Hall ceased to be Editor, Fred Rosen stepped in for Vol. 5, No. 2, then Peter Nicholson was Editor up to Vol. 19. He was assisted in editing Volume 12 by Christopher Rowe, and from Vol. 17 Kyriakos Demetriou was the Assistant Editor. With Vol. 20 Kyriakos Demetriou became the Editor.

In the earlier years, *Polis* appeared at irregular intervals. With Volume 15 in 1998 publication of *Polis* was taken on by Imprint Academic and since then volumes have appeared annually.

Thus, we simply don't know to what extent Plato intended or refused to follow the norms of any ancient genre. Even where Plato's writings seem to have similar characteristics as those by other authors, he may well have given his works such characteristics for reasons entirely his own.

In fact, the best evidence we have for thinking that Plato's *Apology* belongs to any literary genre is the *Apology* of Xenophon. But Xenophon makes clear that he is trying to set the record straight (Xen. *Ap.* 1), which does imply that others' accounts of Socrates' trial are inaccurate. Xenophon's criticisms of others' inaccuracies would be a senseless complaint if such accounts were generally recognized as historically unreliable. Critics of Plato's historicist interpreters claim to know Plato's intentions — but they certainly cannot get these in any direct or obvious way from Plato's own words in his dialogues. The best argument of such critics is comparable to evidence of guilt by association: Because we know (somehow) that all *these* (members of a certain genre) do not tell the truth, we can infer that Plato's works (somehow to be established securely within that genre) do not tell the truth. This is the induction we said Hutchinson's argument makes. But it is one secured only by dubious literary analysis of Plato's works and by very insecure and poorly supported claims about what is and is not historical truth. It is no support, moreover, for denying Plato's historical accuracy to note that other reports of Socrates (in any genre) tell conflicting stories about the man. The same problem is often noted among eyewitnesses in legal cases, for example. And the inference from 'They can't all be true' to 'They all can't be true', is, of course, a *non sequitur*.[23] The problem is figuring out which — if any — have gotten it right, and on what details. For that, some judgement is required, and we may never be able to come to any conclusion on this issue with any great confidence. What the historicists do is to try to reconstruct a plausible case. And what the anti-historicists do is try to reconstruct a very different plausible case. The final decision as to which is the most plausible is left to those of us interested enough to judge the cases the two sides make.

[23] This appears to be the inference we are invited, nonetheless, to make by Kahn: 'Our comparative survey of the Socratic literature is thus designed to correct the misleading historical perspective that is built into Plato's work. But it can do more. At least one feature of the genre can be of decisive importance for an interpretation of Plato's thought. This is the imaginative and essentially fictional nature of Socratic literature' (*Socratic Dialogue*, p. 2). The same strange inference may be found in Morrison, who says, 'The surviving Socratic writings, both whole works and fragments, contain enough anachronisms and inconsistencies and other sorts of historical implausibilities that we can be confident the constraints of this genre were rather loose, and authors were entitled and expected to put a great deal into the mouth of their character "Socrates" which the historical Socrates never said and never would have said' ('Historical Reliability', p. 235). Does it follow from the fact that a group of witnesses tell conflicting stories to the police — as usually happens — that the police *expect* witnesses to tell lies?

But we should recall here one item of evidence the anti-historicists must confront,[24] and we find their confrontations with it awkward at best. Let us consider briefly the version of this confrontation we find in Charles Kahn's recent book:

> Plato's success as a dramatist is so great that he has often been mistaken for an historian. Hence the history of philosophy reports Socrates' thought on the strength of Plato's portrayal in the dialogues. And it is not only modern scholars who fall victim to this illusion. Like Guthrie or Vlastos, Aristotle himself finds the historical Socrates in the *Protagoras* and *Laches*; and the Stoics do much the same.[25]

Kahn's explanation for Aristotle's error is that Aristotle '. . . arrived on the scene too late; he was separated from Socrates by the dazzling screen of Plato's portrayal'.[26] Such a claim to understand Plato's intentions better than Aristotle did is incredible on the face of it. In the first place, Kahn's analysis completely ignores the fact that Aristotle would have been in an excellent position to question others who knew the historical Socrates and who knew how well Plato characterized the views of his great predecessor. That Aristotle would not have taken advantage of such opportunities is simply not plausible.[27]

Finally, it is worth considering how broadly the anti-historicists' standards of historical evidence would effect the entire field of ancient history, if applied more broadly than just to debates about the historicity of Plato's Socrates.[28] Anti-historicist arguments generally follow the form:

1) The historicist reading of Plato is one way to understand what Plato is doing, but
2) There is some other way of understanding what Plato is doing that is also historically possible and would not support historical inferences from the same evidence, and

[24] Though they do not always do so — we note there is no mention of Aristotle's testimony either in W. Prior, 'The Historicity of Plato's *Apology*', *Polis*, 18 (2001), pp. 41–57 or in the anti-historicist criticisms found in either Hutchinson, 'Review of McPherran' or Morrison, 'Historical Reliability'.

[25] Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, p. 3.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 87.

[27] T. Brickhouse argues that Kahn's dismissal of Aristotle as a source about the historical Socrates is implausible. See 'A Review of *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of Literary Form*', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 81 (1999), pp. 94–9. Terry Penner also develops this point against Kahn, showing also why Kahn fails to account for vital aspects of Aristotle's testimony. See 'The Historical Socrates and Plato's Early Dialogues: Some Philosophical Questions', in *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient,* ed. Julia Annas and Christopher Rowe (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), pp. 189–212.

[28] The point we make here was also expressed by several of the participants — most vividly by Jacques Bailly — at the Sixth Annual Arizona Conference in Ancient Philosophy in 2001.

3) We cannot know which of the two ways (the historicist or the alternative given by the anti-historicist) is the truth of the matter, so
4) We should be agnostic about this evidence as regards its historical value.[29]

As plausible as this argument may seem from some *a priori* epistemological point of view, its more general application would have the effect of bringing to an end virtually all historical inquiry about antiquity. In the words of one prominent critic of Socratic studies, we should remind ourselves 'just how slim and fragmentary our evidence for classical antiquity often is, and how dramatically this affects the degree of confidence we are entitled to have in our conclusions'.[30] Fair enough. But if this sobering recognition warrants the kind of scepticism that Morrison and other critics have proposed that we apply to the question of the historical Socrates, then it must also warrant the same degree of scepticism about nearly every other claim historians will ever make about *any* topic, event, or figure in ancient history. The claims of historicist Socratic scholars, we believe, need to satisfy no more stringent standards of evidence that do other historical claims — standards that must rely substantially on admittedly speculative judgements about what makes the best sense of 'slim and fragmentary' evidence. Like ancient historians, historicist interpreters of Plato claim only that their account makes the better sense of the available evidence than do alternatives. They see themselves as open to refutation as additional evidence becomes available or if a different, more compelling way of organizing the evidence is provided.

Given the testimony of Aristotle, and the anti-historicists' inability to account for it in a credible way, therefore, and given a reasonable application of standards appropriate to the inherently speculative field of ancient history, we are inclined to think that the General Historical Identity Thesis remains a viable and attractive interpretive hypothesis — especially given its role in helping to create and sustain Socratic studies as a research programme, about which we will have more to say in the last section of this paper.

III.3 Plato's Dialogues as Hermeneutical Monads

> Those who enjoyed the greatest reputation seemed to me, as I searched in accordance with the god, to be pretty much the most lacking (Plato, *Apology* 22a3–4).

The two criticisms we have considered thus far would not — even if successful — seriously undermine Socratic studies. Notice that even if we accepted both the anti-chronologists' arguments and the anti-historicists' arguments, it would still be open to Socratic scholars to endorse the

[29] A very forthright example of such an argument — and of its inherently speculative nature — is given in Morrison, 'Historical Reliability', p. 252.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 263.

Philosophical Identity Principle. But another recent criticism, from scholars eager to defend literary readings of Plato, would actually compel the abandonment of Socratic studies. According to this criticism, now remarkably popular among some British scholars,[31] Plato's dialogues must be understood as crafted wholes, complete unto themselves, which do and say all that Plato wants without requiring their readers to do extensive reading or study of any of Plato's other works. To interpret these dialogues in such a way as to require their readers to bring to bear passages or arguments from other Platonic dialogues is, according to this view, to accuse Plato of being a 'bad writer'.[32] It is obvious how this view truly does oppose Socratic scholarship in a fundamental way, for the Identity Principle rests on the claim that the best interpretation of a collection of certain Platonic works is the hypothesis that the same philosophy is being expressed or developed in each member of the collection.

We find the interpretive requirement advocated by this criticism a very implausible one in general, but especially implausible when applied to the works of Plato.[33] It is simply absurd to think that, for example, one could be a complete expert on *Hamlet*, for example, but know nothing about any other Shakespearean tragedy, comedy, or sonnet. Even if we granted that Plato's works are *fictions* (which we plainly have *not* granted in this paper or in any of our scholarship), we could compare his dialogues to Arthur Conan Doyle's works involving Sherlock Holmes.[34] One's understanding of Holmes in any one of Doyle's mysteries is clearly enriched by one's understanding of the character of that same name in Doyle's other mysteries. To insist without some additional and compelling reason that the view expressed by the Socrates of any particular dialogue must be understood entirely by consulting only other passages in the same dialogue is to risk seriously misunderstanding the

[31] Not all British scholars, we should note: C.C.W. Taylor has recently made it very clear that he does not find this approach at all plausible for reasons much like those we advance here. See Taylor, *Socrates* (Oxford and New York, 1998), pp. 43–4.

[32] An example of this sort of criticism, which applies the term 'bad writer' as the consequence of using other dialogues to interpret something Plato has Socrates say in the *Apology*, may be found in M. Stokes, *Socratic Questions: New Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates and its Significance*, ed. B. Gower and M. Stokes (London and New York, 1992), pp. 26–81, esp. pp. 30–1. See also E.N. Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato* (Stockholm, 1977), p. 99.

[33] Kahn rejects this approach to Plato's dialogues, but compares it to reading 'each dialogue as if it were a complete literary unit and a thought-world of its own, like the individual plays of Shakespeare or Molière' (*Socratic Dialogue,* p. 37). We would argue that the actual practices of Shakespeare or Molière scholars generally do *not* treat each of their works in complete isolation from all of the others. And even if some few authors invited such exceptional individuality of understanding for each of their works, we would regard this as by far the exceptional case. Most literary authors we know and admire write in ways that make each of their works better understood as we read and consider their other works.

[34] We are grateful to our commentator at the Sixth Annual Arizona Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy, Anthony Chu, for suggesting this parallel to us.

complexity and subtlety of the view at issue and of the 'Socrates' we find exploring that view.

At any rate, the criticism of Socratic scholarship that derives from this interpretive requirement understands the collection of evidence from combing through the relevant group of dialogues as if it were tantamount to the claim that one couldn't possibly understand some one or more passages in the Platonic dialogues correctly — or the dialogues themselves, taken as whole works — without consulting some other dialogue. But that is simply a misunderstanding of the Socratic scholar's use of evidence. Some passages of some Platonic dialogues strike us as puzzling or problematical in some way. We then look for passages in other Platonic dialogues of the appropriate group in order to figure out how best to understand the one that puzzled us. No one will find the interpretation we thereby generate as an acceptable one, however, if it does not make enough sense of the original passage to allow that passage to fit plausibly and naturally within its own argumentative and dialogical context. In other words, the resultant interpretation must qualify as one that readers can plausibly apply to the passage without all the scholarly work. From the fact that some scholar finds the initial passage puzzling and cannot immediately interpret it to his or her satisfaction, nothing follows about whether Plato is a bad writer. Such scholarly puzzlement may only show just how profoundly paradoxical some of Socrates' doctrines are. Or, it may only show that the distance in time and context that we scholars are coming from in our attempt to understand Plato requires special caution. Our remove makes it difficult for us to understand what Plato's original intended audience would have understood clearly and easily.

But even this is to concede too much to the interpretive requirement proposed by the critics. No doubt one of the reasons that the Socrates of Plato's dialogues has become such a role model among philosophers is that he is portrayed as someone for whom consistency of thought, speech, and action was a highest priority. Throughout the dialogues Socratic scholarship has counted as relevant, we find Socrates chastising those who cannot or will not remain consistent, and sometimes contrasting their inconsistencies with his own strong interest in being consistent — whether by bragging about his actually managing to achieve this goal (e.g. at *Crito* 46b–e, 48b–49e; *Gorgias* 481c–482c, 508b–509b), or by bemoaning his ignorance when he finds himself unable to achieve it (e.g. at *Hippias Minor* 372d–e, 376c). To return to our point about Sherlock Holmes, what is significant, of course, is not that Doyle gives the same name to an ingenious detective in each mystery. After all, Plato gives the name 'Socrates' to the principal speaker in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* — dialogues that are not usually examined as part of Socratic studies. Rather, just as Holmes is recognizably the *same character* because of the consistency of how he is described and how he goes about his work, so we think the

Socrates of the relevant dialogues is the same character because of the consistency of his views and of his manner of going about his philosophical work.

Those who suppose that Plato the author need *not* be seen as trying to give Socrates a consistent set of views — all the while having his character by that name emphasize such consistency so relentlessly in his conversations — themselves convict Plato of being a bad writer: we always see Plato's Socrates extolling consistency and insisting that others achieve it, but Plato himself shows no particular concern for such things in his depictions of Socrates' actions and speech, according to the 'hermeneutical monad' approach. On their face, Plato's dialogues seem to require their readers to seek for consistency in their portrait of Socrates. As he converses with many others and in many different circumstances, is the way he speaks and represents himself consistent or not? If so, then this very consistency is what Socratic scholarship has sought all along to reveal and to explicate. If not, then this would seem to count as a very serious complication — if not simply an embarrassment — to the Platonic portrait.[35]

Finally, the fact is that Plato sometimes does make reference in his dialogues to other works he has written. These are clearest in dialogues outside the 'Socratic' group, of course, but it is also the case that several of those within this group are given historical settings that put them into important historical relations with one another. The *Euthyphro* is set before the King-archon's office, before Socrates' trial; the *Apology* gives Socrates three speeches at that trial; and the *Crito* provides a conversation Socrates has with an old friend during one of his last days in jail. Of course, it is a matter of interpretation what such chronological connections in their dramatic dates is supposed to show us. But it does not seem implausible to suppose that such a grouping invites a considerable degree of comparison among the dialogues so connected. Even the earliest collections of Plato's dialogues grouped and sorted them, and such groupings and sortings were taken to have some significance for their interpretation, even if this significance was not originally understood in developmentalist terms.[36] We do not know for whom the dialogues

[35] It is precisely that there is such a 'complication' between what the 'early' or 'Socratic' dialogues and the 'middle' or 'Platonic' ones that is confronted (whether effectively or not) by Socratic scholars' groupings of dialogues into those relevant to the study of Socrates and those that are less so, or not at all. The arguments for such differentiations by content analysis is that Plato maintains such consistency in a certain group of dialogues, and then abandons that consistency (presumably, in favour of consistency in another set of dialogues and doctrines) in a different group of dialogues. This 'complication' is often explained developmentally, but it can obviously be explained in other ways, as we find in Cooper, 'Introduction', pp. viii–xxx and Nails, 'Problems with Vlastos', pp. 273–92. But it is one thing to see the inconsistencies between the two groups as a problem to be explained away and quite another to insist that Plato's 'literary' goals require that we should not recognize such inconsistencies as a problem at all.

[36] For discussion, see Cooper, ' Introduction', pp. viii–xii.

were written, or even if some were written for significantly different audiences than others. But certainly one audience for at least some of the dialogues was those gathered in Plato's Academy. The idea that Plato's students and colleagues would read and understand his works entirely independent from one another and in no specific groupings or order is one that cannot be supported by anything else we know about the Academy or those who lived and worked there. Indeed, the best evidence of how those in Plato's Academy read the dialogues must surely be the evidence we get from Aristotle, whose stay at the school lasted nearly twenty years and whose interpretive practices, as we said in the last section, are quite the opposite of those called for by the modern critics' interpretive insistence that each dialogue should be treated as a literary and doctrinal whole, none is to be understood as having any special philosophical connection to any of the others.

For these reasons, we find the most dangerous of the criticisms we have considered in this paper also to be the least plausible and the least supported by the available evidence. It follows that unless the critics of Socratic scholarship have better criticisms to make than these, there is no reason for scholars to give any ground at all to such critics. Even if we do not and cannot know whether Socratic scholarship understands Socrates or Plato's dialogues rightly, we have certainly been provided with no plausible reasons in the criticisms we have addressed in this paper for thinking that such scholarship is as naïve or as wrongheaded as its critics have claimed.

IV
Socratic Studies as a Research Programme

> Athenians, at this point I'm far from making this defence on my behalf, as one might think, but instead I'm making it on yours, so that by condemning me you don't make a terrible mistake regarding the gift the god has given you. For if you kill me, you won't easily find another person like me (Plato, *Apology* 30d6–e2).

We began this paper by calling Socratic studies a 'research programme'. In calling it by this term, we mean to include it within those intellectual enterprises that share certain foundational principles, and then attempt to generate an interesting or useful larger system of knowledge or information on the basis of these shared principles. So far in this paper, we have attempted to defend the foundational principles of Socratic studies against some of the criticisms that have recently been made against them. We wish to end our discussion, however, by shifting the focus from the foundational principles themselves to another very important aspect of any research programme — the fruit it produces as a result of working from such foundational principles.

Insofar as the foundational principles of a research programme are demonstrably flawed in some way, there is plainly a great risk that work within the

programme will end up falling short of the goal of forming 'an interesting or useful larger system of knowledge or information', as we put it, precisely because any information or system that derives from such flawed principles could end up being fatally infected with the flaws of the principles from which that work derives. We might think of the research programmes of phrenology or astrology as examples of research programmes simply doomed by such fatally flawed foundational principles. Our recognition of this possibility should make any researcher within a given research programme attentive to serious criticisms of that programme's foundational principles.

But notice that this kind of transference of flaws is neither inevitable nor necessary in any directly logical way — one can, after all, derive true conclusions from false premises without violating the laws of logic. Research programmes that go on for some time and are pursued by many researchers begin to generate certain results. These results begin to have a certain evidentiary value of their own, as support for the value of the foundational principles *as* foundational principles — a weight, we claim, that puts a certain burden of proof on those who argue for ending the research practice supported by such principles.

To be more specific about Socratic studies, what we are driving at in these general remarks is this: On the basis of the foundational principles we have defended in this paper, a very substantial body of research has been produced. The value of these principles as interpretive hypotheses is not simply dependent upon their defenders' ability to explicate their plausibility as simple statements or propositions — so that if reasons for doubting them are given, the only reasonable response is to become agnostic about them, as critics suggest. We claim that these principles are given considerable justification by the body of scholarly work to which they have given rise, precisely because that scholarly work meets the standards required of a successful research programme — again, the standards of providing, on the basis of the research programme's foundational principles, 'an interesting or useful larger system of knowledge or information' — in this case, embodied in interconnected interpretations of the relevant dialogues of Plato.

We have always conceded in our own work — as most Socratic scholars invariably do either explicitly or implicitly — that we cannot be sure whether the philosophical views we expose and explicate really do belong to the historical Socrates,[37] which is the only concession the anti-historicists can claim

[37] Prior ('Historicity', pp. 41–57) argues against any interpretation that claims that Plato's portrait of Socrates provides an accurate description of the man himself or the philosophical views he used to advance. He rightly points out our sympathy with an historicist reading of Plato's *Apology* in our *Socrates on Trial,* although as Prior also notes we avoid claiming of any particular line or passage that it was actually uttered by the historical Socrates at his trial. See T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, *Socrates on Trial* (Oxford and Princeton, 1989), pp. 2–13. If we were historicists at that time, we were prepared to embrace only a very weak version of the doctrine, one indeed that would be difficult to distinguish from what Prior says is his own view, namely that all Plato's portrait of Socrates does is to capture the 'spirit of its historical model' (Prior, 'Historicity', p. 42). Perhaps because he focuses primarily on the case against a historicist reading of the *Apology,* Prior makes no mention of our explicit refusal to embrace historicism in any form in *Plato's Socrates* (T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford and New York, 1994), pp. viii–ix). Finally, Prior is familiar with the various theses we have set forth in this paper, for he refers to them explicitly in his own paper ('Historicity', p. 43, note 4). Prior fails to make clear that we now reject any thesis sufficiently strong to support a historicist reading of any of the Platonic dialogues.

their own arguments merit. But working from the foundational principles of Socratic studies — that is, working from the assumption that there is a coherent 'Socratic philosophy' in Plato's early or Socratic dialogues — we believe that our own books and articles, and those of others at work in this research programme, with ever-increasing sophistication and refinement, prove the vitality and viability of the foundational principles from which we have worked *as* foundational principles for a research programme.

Those who would call for the abandonment of these principles need to do more than argue for sceptical scenarios intended to create doubts about the principles. Such a strategy may be adequate for suspension of belief about individual claims of fact or value, but the situation is considerably different where such claims are recognized as the foundational principles or hypotheses of a flourishing research programme. Even if the sceptics can plausibly show that the claims made in these foundational principles do not pass the high evidentiary standards of critical inquiry all on their own, the principles enjoy further support from the research programme they motivate. A case in point is the research programme called the unitarian approach to the Platonic dialogues that was dominant in the first part of the twentieth century. It too had a foundational principle, namely, that Plato held the same rich philosophical views throughout his career as a philosophical writer. The unitarian approach gradually fell out of favour in the community of scholars interested in Plato, but not because the foundational assumption of unitarianism itself came under attack. Rather, scholars gradually became convinced that the project required too many 'epicycles', too many *ad hoc* explanations of passages. The developmentalist view that replaced it did so not because the foundational principles of developmentalism were put up against the foundational principle of unitarianism and were deemed to be more plausible. Instead, many scholars concluded that developmentalism and what we are calling Socratic studies makes better sense of the relevant information. For critics to provide adequate grounds for ending Socratic studies, accordingly, they must be prepared not just to cast doubt on its foundational principles. Either they must disprove such principles, or explain why the research founded on such principles is so without value or promise as not to be worth pursuing or refining. Alternatively, they must provide a way of understanding Plato's writings that makes better sense than Socratic studies does. There is no shortage of

criticism in the world of scholarship, of course; but to our knowledge no criticism of Socratic studies has met or even approached meeting any of these criteria of success.

The Athenians on that jury in 399 BC condemned the philosopher Socrates to death. But he was already an old man and there was little chance that he would have lived for a great deal longer anyway. Athens' tragic loss, as a result of those jurors' judgement of Socrates, was thus tempered by its inevitability, which they only hastened to some extent. As Plato has Socrates tell us in the *Apology*, however, to recognize this fact is not at all to diminish the culpability of the prosecutors for the role they played in obtaining this result or of those jurors for making the judgement that they made (*Apology* 39b1–6). But research programmes can span many generations of individual human beings, and the one we have defended in this paper is already the product of inter-generational interest, and continues to be renewed in the term papers, masters theses, and doctoral dissertations of students. The programme matures with each new scholarly contribution to the field. So even if the Socrates of each such effort is not all the same in every student's or scholar's account and even if the philosopher who is exposed in such accounts is perhaps but a pale shadow of the intriguing Athenian philosopher whose charisma our studies barely reflect, the students' and scholars' Socrates will go on living and philosophizing as long as the research programme in his name continues to bear fruit.

There is some reason to suppose that the jurors at the historical trial were already deeply prejudiced against Socrates, and so it may well have been that the burden of proof at the historical trial fell (however unfairly) on the defendant. For the reasons we have given in this paper, however, we contend that the burden of proof in the case against Socratic studies lies with the prosecution. It is a burden, we claim, that the prosecutors have not borne nearly well enough to put an end to research programme they have attacked. Aristotle is said to have refused to allow the Athenians to 'sin a second time against philosophy'; so should we refuse to allow Kahn and others to complete the job of the ancient accusers and to 'sin a second time' by removing what can appropriately be called 'the philosophy of Socrates' from the history of thought.

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